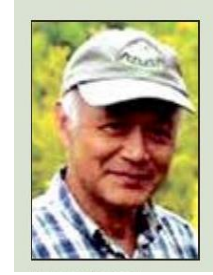


# Zen and the Art of Meditation Garden

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## Create your own peaceful sanctuary

Zen is a school of Buddhism originating in China and strongly influenced by Taoism. The word translates to motionless meditation and a mental state of peacefulness and relaxation. Such enlightenment is obtained through a process of inward search and reckoning of one's true nature.

A Zen garden, therefore, is a sacred and meditative place for thoughts. It is appropriately defined as "a special spiritual place where the mind dwells." In today's increasingly chaotic life, such a place allows us to reconnect with nature and experience the wholeness of self.

The Japanese garden is well known for its harmony and subdued beauty. It offers insights and inspiration for the design of our own private sanctuary, but its intricate authenticity comes from deep within, not a quick fix for any garden.

The foundation of Japanese garden is its focus on nature. It is also about spatial relationship, when every element in the garden expresses inherent "force" that must be recognized and harmonized. And the focus is on four seasons, to capture nature's changing mood.

There are five different types of Japanese gardens; each offers different hints for creating our meditation garden: 1) dry, 2) courtyard, 3) tea, 4) stroll, and 5) hill-and-pond.

The **Dry Garden** is unique and not seen in the rest of the world. Its stone arrangements, white sand, moss, and pruned low trees are used to mimic natural landscape. As its name implies, there are no pond, stream, or real water. The raked sand symbolically represents rippled seawater. And stone groupings are islands.

The dry garden is for contemplation from adjacent space, rather than the physical entry. This garden type, in Western interpretation, is referred to as a Zen garden. Its serenity resulting from exhibited "nothingness" is soothing and a real inspiration for a meditation garden.

The **Courtyard Garden** is an enclosed inner garden surrounded by buildings or garden structures. It brings a detailed representation of the natural world into a very small space. The sheltered enclosure would easily offer the ambience for a meditation garden.

The **Tea Garden** is an open space between the guest entrance and the teahouse. This entry garden includes a stepping-stone path built in a forest-like setting, to allow the guest to move slowly, thus settling the mind before reaching the teahouse.



A Hill and Pond Garden with well-defined viewpoints. *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners*

Along the path, there is typically a roofed bench for the guest to wait for the summons from the host, before entering the pure inner world. To avoid distracting the guests in their meditation passage, the garden often lacks bright, showy plants or ornaments. Stone arrangements with a water basin and wooden ladle, are provided to allow the guest to cleanse before entering the teahouse. The strongly meditative setting of the tea garden could be a blueprint for our meditation garden.

The ***Stroll Garden*** connects different parts of the overall garden and offers additional experience. One important design consideration is the different views offered at different points and in certain sequence. It can create a destination feel for our meditation garden and add to its meaning.

The ***Hill-and-Pond Garden*** is a large-scale garden, originating from China more than 2,000 years ago and is older than the other four types. It combines manmade hills and ponds and represents both coastlines and islands. The concept of a hill-and-pond garden can add depth to our meditation garden. The hill can be a backdrop, and the pond can be a lake or ocean view farther away from the meditation garden.





Gate to tea garden and zig-zagged flagstone path symbolize the journey to eternal peace. *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners*

To create our unique sanctuary, locate the space for tranquility and freedom from noise and distractions. The following are some design ideas:

- Make it a **destination**, to give a sense of arrival through a designed journey. It does not have to be a long pathway, and the concept of a *tea garden* or a *stroll garden* (above) could apply.
- Provide a **gate** and **enclosure**, to create a separation from the rest of the world and make the garden private. The enclosure may be a fence, a natural hedgerow, or stone terrace. Consider having its own ground surface, to set the space distinctly apart. The concept of a *courtyard garden* (above) would apply.
- Connect the garden to **woodland**, to immerse in or for a lookout to the serenity of natural beauty. A shaded site is better than an open site, contributing to a sheltered and restful feel.
- Incorporate simple and miniaturized **planting** inside the garden. A backdrop of taller trees adjacent to the garden would be helpful, which is the “borrowed scenery” design principle of Japanese garden.

- Choose **colors** that are more commonly found in nature, such as greens, browns, and blues. Avoid colors that are excessively bright and stimulating.
- If a *dry garden* concept (above) is desired, include **raked sand** and **large rocks**. Adhere to the “nothingness” theme of the dry garden.
- Add **water features**. The sound of running water masks traffic noise, has a calming effect, and brings greater focus. If the existing terrain allows, apply a small scale *hill-and-pond garden* (above). Or use a self-contained, pond-less bubbler or gurgler.
- Add other **garden features**, such as sculptural ornaments (stone lantern or stupa), bridges (symbolizing passage to nature) and steep stairs (helping in reaching of Zen). Although the components do matter, it is the meanings that are important.
- Provide **seating** space within the garden or overlooking the garden. This can be a comfortable chair or a simple beach towel on the ground.

A Zen-influenced meditation garden is nature permeated with the spiritual. It fosters a sense of peace, tranquility, and comfort. Through the reconnection to nature, we find mindful awareness of the present moment, a release from daily stress, and a path to reach a more balanced way in our everyday life.

### **Resources:**

- *Japanese Gardens: Symbolism and Design*. Seiko Goto and Takahiro Naka, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2016.
- *Japanese-Style Gardens*. Brian Funk and Sarah Schmidt, editors, Brooklyn Botanic Garden. 2015.
- *Zen Gardens: The Complete Works of Shunmyo Masuno, Japan’s Leading Garden Designer*. Mira Locher, Tuttle Publishing. 2012.
- *Landscaping for Privacy: Innovative Ways to Turn Your Outdoor Space into a Peaceful Retreat*. Marty Wingate, Timber Press. 2011.